

# Destination Iceland: The Trade Ships

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It's 1872 and after a long, hard winter, isolated from neighbouring farms by wind, snow and sleet that come in howling storms, trapped inside with no heat but body heat from the other household members plus some heat from the cattle in their pens, it's time to ride to the coast to a Markaðr, the annual trip to trade goods with the Danish ships that have anchored off-shore, a trip that each way may take ten days.

The winter has been spent with everyone knitting and weaving on a fixed and standing loom. The good weavers wove three yards a day of *wadmal*, as the cloth is called. It comes in a variety of colours: grey, black, light blue, the russet brown of undyed wool, and sometimes white.

On the trip to the trading station, every rider has two horses so that the rider can change as the horses get tired. With them was also a string of pack horses loaded with supplies. In the packs would be woolen mittens, stockings, fine socks, ordinary *wadmal* jackets, fine *wadmal* jackets, wool, eiderdown, other bird feathers, tallow, butter, salted mutton and beef. There might even have been one or two fox skins and maybe some bird skins. Swan skins have become rare by this time, and command a high price.

Women rode side-saddle to the harbour where the trading fair was held. Side-saddles were little more than chairs set sideways on a horse. The side-saddles gave the rider little control over the horse and women were at greater risk than men when fording rivers. The side-saddles used for this yearly event had unusually elaborate foot-boards, with backs of worked brass to display the farmer's wealth and status.

As you get closer to the harbour, you can see other groups of horses and riders that are descending from the hills and, before you, groups of farmers and peasants have already gathered in clusters in front of the shore. The men greet each other with the traditional kiss, then study

the ships.

You pitch your tents and begin by finding out what is being charged and paid by the Danish merchants. No cash changes hands. Everything is done by trading goods. The Danes control both the selling and buying prices.

The *Sýslumaðr*, in his gold-laced cap and uniform buttons struts about to keep order, because the drinking is heavy. The *Sýslumaðr* is similar to a sheriff. He was granted an area called *Sýsla* in which he was responsible for collecting tolls, taxes and fines, and upholding the law. The Danish merchants are free-handed with liquor before the bargaining begins so

there is a party atmosphere to the gathering. The men row out to the two Danish ships and scramble up the ladders. The women wear white head-ker-

clothes and caps, saddlery, wool carders, querns of basalt for grinding grain, horse shoes, and spinning wheels; sugar, grain, tobacco, and especially rye spirits. Everything is needed: timber, salt, grain, coffee, spices. The timber consists of pine and fir, the forms are beams for roofing and framing, twenty-two to twenty-four feet long, one-inch boards for siding for houses, three-inch planks and finer woods for the cabinet maker. Salt is essential for salting both fish and meat and the only local salt that is available sometimes is called dirty salt because it comes from burning seaweed. There may be birch wood, sawn and split for fuel, but it is not for ordinary people. Only the Danish merchants can afford it. There are cereals – rye and wheat – that can be bought as grain, flour or



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## Skógafoss Iceland

chiefs over their usual black caps, and instead of shawls they cover their shoulders with short scarves that reach only to the waist. In spite of their bulky petticoats, they manage to climb the ladders and over the gunwales of the ships.

The ships have been constructed like a store. There's a desk and a counter. Sometimes, the stores supply most of the Icelander's necessities – dry goods,

already made into biscuits. The farmers prefer the grain because the flour is often mouldy or in poor condition. Buying grain means the laborious task of grinding it with a handmill but that is work for the servants. They can do that when they are not pounding hardfish with a stone hammer to ready it for eating. You will be buying a lower-quality rice in quantity, because, like most Icelanders,

you like to make rice milk. In the years between 1864 and 1870, the amount of imported rice quintupled. The available spices are usually cinnamon, cloves and nutmeg. Twist tobacco is bought for chewing as well as smoking.

The favorite form of tobacco is snuff. The merchants have a large cargo

hymn singing at night.

When the trading and visiting are done, it is time to return to the farm. The horses' pack saddles are set on pieces of turf to protect the horses from saddle sores. Each saddle has wooden pegs jutting from its sides, and wooden chests full of the traded goods are hung from

horses have to be driven into the water to swim for the other bank. Some turn back and have to be caught and forced back into the river. Most of the time, though, there is no ferry and you have to follow a local guide across the least dangerous path.

But you've been to visit the fair,



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### Mountain hut near Snæfellsnes Peninsula

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of port, sherry, claret and champagne, rum and cognac, and even cherry brandy to trade with the better off farmers. Most such liquor is expensive and of poor quality. Sometimes, the traders bring so much liquor that they don't have room for the supplies the Icelanders want and need. The *brennivín*, *kornschnapps* and rye spirits are cheap. The profits for the traders are high.

According to F.R. Burton, who attended one of these markets, there was considerable hard drinking and loud

the pegs. The trip will be slow because the packs often shift and have to be righted.

Although it is summer, traversing the quaking bogs, ravines and rivers may be made more difficult by rain, sleet and snow. The *hæði* and the river fords have holes filled with quicksand that horses sink into and have to be pulled out. Some rivers have ice rushing down from the glaciers. There is the occasional ferry. In most cases, it is a small rowboat that can only take people and their supplies. The

boarded the trade ships, purchased at least some of the goods you need for the coming year, seen people you haven't seen for twelve months, caught up on news. In the weeks ahead, there is shortening daylight, growing darkness, winter wind and rain and cold, but you've been to the fair, been inside the ships and bought at least some of the things you'll need to survive for another year.

*With notes and quotes from R.F. Burton's Ultima Thule, 1875*

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